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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002448

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE CLAN VIOLENCE LEAVES OVER 20 DEAD

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reason: 1.4 (b and d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Assailants in the southern Philippines November 23 killed a group of women from a prominent Muslim clan, their staff members, and accompanying journalists en route to register one of the clan's leading members for a provincial gubernatorial election. Family members of the dead have alleged that the massacre was the work of another influential Muslim family that wields political control of two Muslim-majority regions in Mindanao, but few hard facts are available. In an effort to prevent further violence and facilitate the investigation, President Arroyo on November 24 declared a state of emergency in the provinces of Maguindanao and neighboring Sultan Kudarat province, and Cotabato City. The Philippine Secretary of National Defense traveled to the South to launch an inquiry, and an additional 900 military and police forces were deployed to bolster security in an area that also harbors a long-running Muslim insurgency. Most observers suspect that long-running clan rivalries lie behind the attack, but election violence is also endemic throughout the Philippines and particularly in Mindanao. Post is recommending an update to the current travel warning for portions of Mindanao (septel). End Summary.

GRISLY MASSACRE

2. (C) On November 23, residents of the southern province of Maguindanao discovered the corpses of over 20 victims of a grisly massacre that took place between the towns of Shariff Aguak and Ampatuan. Details of the attack remain imprecise. Reports claimed between 21 and 43 persons were killed, primarily by gunfire; some 25 bodies had been recovered by police as of the afternoon of November 24. Police sources told Embassy contacts that so far they could not verify widespread media reports that the assailants decapitated or raped some of the victims (nearly half in the group were women). Embassy RSO staff received from contacts in Maguindanao a list of 35 named members of the group that was attacked, broken down as follows:

- 12 members of the politically prominent Mangudadatu family, including the Vice Mayor of Mangudadatu municipality and the wife of the Vice Mayor of Buluan municipality. The list of names indicates all of the Mangudadatu family members likely were women.

- 11 staff members accompanying the Mangudadatu family members.

- 12 Filipino journalists, including four associated with public television outlet UNTV and one associated with the national newspaper Manila Bulletin.

¶3. (SBU) The group was en route from Buluan to Shariff Aguak in order to register Ishmael Mangudadatu, currently Bualan municipality Vice Mayor, to compete in the Maguindanao province gubernatorial election. Vice Mayor Mangudadatu intends to compete for the governorship against a member of the highly influential Ampatuan clan, who control the post of governor of both Maguindanao and the overarching Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. Mangudadatu allegedly received warnings that he would be in danger if he filed his election registration papers in person, and he therefore sent women -- accompanied by journalists -- to do the job, on the premise that they would be less likely to be targeted for violence.

¶4. (SBU) Vice Mayor Mangudadatu, whose wife and two sisters died in the attack, claimed that, prior to her death, his wife informed him by cell phone that a large armed group had confronted her and her companions. This armed group allegedly made reference to Vice Mayor Mangudadatu's election registration papers, according to press reports. Mangudadatu claimed publicly that Andal Ampatuan, Jr. (son of the current Maguindanao governor) was part of the armed group.

¶5. (C) There have been rumors that some uniformed police officials were included in the armed group that confronted the Mangudadatus near Shariff Aguak. Embassy contacts and open sources have claimed that the perpetrators began shooting their victims after an altercation began.

BAD BLOOD

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¶6. (SBU) The Mangudadatus and Ampatuans are prominent Muslim clans in Mindanao. The patriarch of the Ampatuan clan is Andal Ampatuan, Sr., current Governor of Maguindanao. One of Governor Ampatuan's sons, Zaldy Ampatuan, is serving as Governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which encompasses Maguindanao and other provinces in the region.

¶7. (SBU) The Mangudadatus are not as wealthy or powerful as the Ampatuans (with whom they have some family ties), but they have significant influence in Maguindanao, particularly in Buluan municipality. The current Governor of adjacent Sultan Kudarat province is Suharto Mangudadatu, son of clan patriarch Pax Mangudadatu.

¶8. (SBU) Both the Ampatuans and the Mangudadatus are affiliated with the Lakas-Kampi-CMD ruling party, and they have at times cooperated in political matters. Both maintain well-armed militias. The Ampatuans are staunch allies of President Arroyo, having helped her and her allies to prevail decisively in the ARMM in 2004 and 2007 elections. Both the Ampatuans and the Mangudadatus are predominantly of the Islamic faith.

TENSE AFTERMATH

¶9. (SBU) Prominent members of the Ampatuan clan have not issued any public statement on the massacre. Embassy contacts, including at least one member of the Mangudadatu clan, have told us that the Mangudadatus will wait to see how the investigation into the slaying proceeds, rather than launching an immediate counterattack. President Arroyo on November 24 declared a state of emergency in Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat provinces, as well as nearby Cotabato City, in order to prevent further violence.

¶10. (SBU) In response to the attack, Secretary of National Defense Gonzales traveled to Cotabato City. (The Armed Forces of the Philippines is assisting in the investigation.) In a previously scheduled meeting, the Undersecretary of National Defense for Plans and Programs, Antonio Santos,

discussed the Maguindanao incident with CODEL Filner and the DCM. Santos said that the reports he received tracked with media information. The Undersecretary added that while the Ampatuan family is allied politically with the Arroyo administration, "We have to enforce the law," and noted that the administration has tasked NBI with investigating the case to avoid any conflict of interest in the pursuit of possible charges against Philippine National Police (PNP) officials.

¶11. (SBU) The DCM asked whether the scale of the attack was surprising, given the history of political violence in Mindanao. Santos initially replied that the only surprising aspect of the attack was that it occurred so early in the election season, but then corrected himself and noted the troubling large number of victims and targeting of reporters. There is "deep-seated hatred between the clans. This (attack) is crazy. Unthinkable."

COMMENT

¶12. (C) In many parts of the Philippines, the competition for political influence remains brutal and primordial. Even by those standards, however, the November 23 massacre stands out for its barbarism. We will encourage the national government to launch a credible and effective investigation to bring the perpetrators to justice and help to keep the conflict between the Ampatuan and Mangudadatu clans from escalating further.
KENNEY